

## *Chapter Fifteen*

*A*ll of this sifting and sorting and getting rid of in the material realm was actually mirroring a much deeper emotional and spiritual process inside me. That was the real work of this time. As much as it looked like I was clearing out my mother's house, what I was really doing was the even more challenging task of grieving. I knew that I was at a major turning point in my life — my last parent had just died and I was about to head back into the world alone, without immediate family. I knew from earlier losses that grieving was the bridge from where I was to whatever new life I was about to embark on. I needed to integrate all that I had just been through, to let this deep and profound loss open me to new possibilities. I knew from experience that the pain and heartbreak of loss is not meant to constrict, to diminish us. It's meant to expand and grow us into the next stage of our lives.

As I thought more about it, I realized that in many ways,

life is a continual encounter with ending after ending and moving through to the next opening. And that it is the emptiness that follows the ending that carries us to the opening. We don't need to be afraid of the sensations of lack, the unfulfilled longing, the powerlessness to make it otherwise, the uncertainty about what's to come. They are the waves on which we can ride to new places in ourselves and in our lives.

I thought, too, about the many transitions that are made through loss, through giving up what was. It is actually the first thing asked of us when we're forced to leave the womb. Then there's the baby who gives up the mother's breast to drink from a cup, the girl who surrenders her toys, the young adult who leaves home, the mother of grown children who faces her empty nest. Learning to let go of what was before in order to fully partake of what's to come is a lifelong process. We are continually asked in a sense to say goodbye — to people, places, things, time, feelings, dreams, ages, abilities, events. Everything in this world is finite. So by definition, it has to end, we have to let go. And willingness to experience loss is the key to this core movement of life.

Death, of course, is the ultimate letting go. For the person who is dying, the challenge is to exit with dignity, to accept that their time on earth is ending and that they must leave all that was once dear to them. For the bereaved, the challenge is to separate, to let go of the loved one they lost and to some extent the self they were, to go on with life and still remember. Some days it felt like too much. Just the thought that I would never again see her or talk to her or hear her voice or give her a hug, felt so painful. Especially in the first weeks after *shivah*, I thought at times that my heart would break — but somehow it just kept stretching to hold whatever I was willing to let myself feel. Hashem was clearly helping me, as He had before, to make